

THE INDIAN SCENE

II. THE REPORT AND AFTER

SEVEN good men and true were despatched by Parliament on a mission to square, if they could, the Indian political circle. They have circled the square miles of India, and have submitted the results of their inquiry, and the recommendations which they have to place before Parliament and the British nation, no less than before those limited numbers in India who are capable of playing an intelligent part in politics. Such men, outside the Indians in the higher services, are few in numbers, for I doubt whether there are more than a few thousand who could stand an examination on the Simon Report, no matter how many times they have read it; or who could give any reasoned idea of the real meaning of 'Responsible Government,' and the manner in which it should or would work over the sub-continent as a whole. Shouting for Swaraj is one thing; working it is another. Yet almost the whole of political India is writing and talking as if these two things were identical. Even those men who were able to draw up in polished English a Nehru Constitution as a thesis appear unable to perceive that when they say that they have not read the Report, and do not intend to read it, but that in their opinion it is a despicable document, they are destroying any reputation that they might wish to claim for commonsense, fairmindedness, and goodwill. One of the so-called 'Moderates,'—or 'Liberals,' as they like to term themselves—who has presumably read the Report, is said to have described it as 'a piece of unparalleled political humbug and chicanery,' and to have gone on to compare this document with Miss Katherine Mayo's book, *Mother India*. This is not the outpouring of some irresponsible fanatic, but the language used by a man who under this 'repressive British Government' held the high position of Law Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council.

And now to the Report itself.

Volume i. lays before the British public a wonderful panorama of the vast sub-continent which we call India, and the diversified nature of the races and creeds which go to make up its huge

population. . The whole situation is depicted with great skill and lucidity, and is entirely free from exaggeration ; indeed, the Commission is careful to be a little blind to the political defects, and exceedingly kind to the political virtues, which the actual working of the existing Reforms has disclosed. No body of men could have more greatly striven than have Sir John Simon and his colleagues to be fair both to British achievements and to Indian aspirations ; to understand both, and to make allowances for all points of view.

In volume ii. the Commission has courageously laid bare the grounds for the numerous doubts and difficulties which have assailed it at every step, and has tersely and lucidly explained the reasons which have led it, on the balance of arguments, to prefer one conclusion to another. It has left no doubt in the mind of any impartial reader that it has based its recommendations on a strict adherence to the ultimate goal which Mr. Montagu announced and Parliament ratified by passing the Government of India Act of 1919. It has nowhere criticised the wisdom of that announcement, although it makes it clear that the ultimate realisation of the goal, when and if it is realised, is more likely to shape itself on some other model than that of Westminster. The Report stands, and will always stand, as a clearing of sound argument and lucid exposition in a vast wilderness of specious phrases, conflicting claims and turbulent demands, whereby the basic facts that must govern the situation are entirely obscured.

All will agree in principle that, no matter what shape the new Indian Constitution takes, it can succeed in the present and progress in the future only by peaceful co-operation between the divergent elements that go to make up the whole ; and it is on this account that the Commissioners, while commending a bold advance towards self-government in the provinces, find it necessary to ensure security, both from foes without and foes within, in order that their scheme of constitutional advance may enjoy the degree of stability essential to all progress.

Since 1858, for the last seventy-two years, that stability has been secured, for reasons upon which it is unnecessary to dilate, by the maintenance of the *Pax Britannica* ; and the Commissioners believe that for many years to come the continuance of this *Pax Britannica* must be secured, or the new constitutional fabric will be wrecked on the threshold. They therefore provide that the new Central Government shall be strong ; that the Army in India must be kept entirely away from politics and political contest ; that reserve powers shall continue to reside in the Governor-General and the Governors of provinces, to be used in certain emergencies of a specified nature, and that the security services must be retained on an All-India basis, and

under the control of the Secretary of State. With these bulwarks against the complete wreck of young self-governing institutions by foreign invasions or internal disorder, the Commissioners tried to envisage the future progress towards a federation of Indian States and British Indian provinces under a federal Government in which both shall exercise a voice in controlling those functions of government which are generally recognised the world over as pertaining to a central authority rather than to the component States which make up the combined territory.

The Commissioners have refrained from referring to the term 'Dominion Status' which has figured in the announcements of the Viceroy with the approval of His Majesty's present Government, and has just been repeated since the publication of the Report. Their silence is obviously deliberate. These announcements have been made without their consent in a way that was bound to prejudice the acceptance of their conclusions. They could not criticise the term without both criticising the Viceroy and the Government that had used or sanctioned its use. On the other hand, they were unable to commend it.

Every territory, small or great, developed or backward, is one of the dominions of the King. Every such dominion, from the great self-governing Colonial States down to the smallest island under the Union Jack, has a *status* of its own. The United Kingdom and India are exceptional only because one is called a kingdom and the other an empire, though they are equally dominions under the sovereignty of the Crown. The term 'Dominion' (with a capital 'D') is a term of comparatively recent coinage, and the status attached to it is one which has not yet been defined by statute. India might at some date take her place as a component part of the collection of self-governing States that owe allegiance to the Crown, but, if so, she would not fall into the same category as Canada or New Zealand, if only for the reason that greater India contains both the territories of Indian princes, which are not democracies, and of British provinces which would be self-governing in the modern sense. The constitutions of these dominion States inside the British Empire are not exactly similar to one another, and it is not even certain that they have reached a final stage, but Indian politicians concentrate upon the description of the group of Dominions which was put into popular rather than legal language at the Imperial Conference of 1926. From this description they derive the conclusion that these Dominions possess the right to secede, and that if similar conditions were applied to India, secession—that is to say, complete independence—could be no longer constitutionally and legally resisted. No one who reads the Montagu announcement of 1917, or the preamble to the Government of India Act, can

suppose that the responsible government to which he refers was intended to include a right of secession. To declare, therefore, that words used in 1926 in respect of British Colonies were implicit in an announcement made nine years before is to add to, and not merely to interpret, the significance of Mr. Montagu's announcement. Those who know Indian politicians, and who they really are, know that they do not care a straw about distant goals; what they want is immediate power, and they were certain to take the Viceroy's announcement as an attempt to mollify the ultimatum delivered by Congress in December 1928. The Government fell into this trap; the Simon Commission refused to do so; and the Government now find themselves in the awkward position either of admitting their error or of throwing over the Simon Report as, forsooth, a reactionary document. In the former case, they will be certainly accused of deceiving the Indian public; in the latter, they will certainly have deceived the British nation.

In the meantime the Commission has pointed out the only direction in which it is even possible to discern, however dimly, an India settling down as a federal State among the families of nations that compose the British Empire as it exists to-day. The road they sketch is long, and its length cannot yet be measured, but the course is set to a definite scheme of development instead of to a terminus of confused issues and disputable phrases.

The Commissioners would be themselves the last to deny that there is room for criticism of some among the multifarious proposals that they put forward. For example, their scheme depends upon the bulwarks standing against the pressure to which they will be subjected. They desire a franchise which will at least treble the present electorates in the hope that these enlarged electorates will exercise greater restraint upon an oligarchy (p. 94 of volume ii.) of Ministers and legislative bodies than the present smaller electorates have been able to do. They may, or they may not. Certainly the example of Burma, where elementary literacy is much more widely developed than in India, and the electorates are even now larger than the Commissioners project for Indian provinces, cannot be called encouraging. Indeed, it is the reverse. The Commissioners also advocate that the provincial legislative councils should be much enlarged, and they propose further the abolition of what is called the official *bloc*. The enlargement of the councils is intended to follow naturally from the extension of the franchise, but the abolition of the official *bloc* is recommended for other reasons.

The case for this drastic elimination of official influence from the councils is based on the argument that the presence of the small band of officials militates against the growth of the sense

of responsibility in these legislative bodies. This is the position taken by all those who desire to defend provincial councils from an indictment of irresponsibility. When the opinion is expressed that provincial legislative councils have on the whole not been too unreasonable, and the fact that certain Bills have been passed and supplies voted is adduced in their favour, it would certainly be worth investigation of the division lists in order to discover how many of the measures passed would have been rejected if it had not been for the voting power and the influence of the official members. Indeed, it would be necessary to go even further and examine what motions before these councils would have been respectively passed or rejected if the decision had been that of Hindu elected members only, for in the majority of councils, if there had been no official *bloc*, the Hindu vote would have been greater than the aggregate vote of the various minorities which find a place on these bodies. It is to be observed that in two provinces the system of government broke down; it is also to be observed that the National Congress, which at all events has not displayed much sense of responsibility for a great many years past, has throughout been entirely free from all Government influence within that body. To my judgment at least, this step proposed by the Commissioners is a leap in the dark. For it is at least equally possible that those reasonable Indians who have supported reasonable measures were inspired to hold out against the opposition by the example and support of the Government members and of their European non-official colleagues. The Commissioners have partially recognised this danger by their proposal to permit of the influence of a limited number of officials who can be heard on the merits of those subjects of which they possess special administrative or expert knowledge, but without any right to vote. This half-way house is absolutely essential if the abolition of official members on the legislatures should be accepted.

The Commission further proposes that a Governor may appoint one or two official Ministers (or even non-officials), Indian or British, who would not be drawn from the legislative council. Such a Minister would be in charge of a portfolio and would have equal rights with other Ministers as a member of the Governor's Cabinet. This is a very valuable safeguard which is sure to be resisted by the politicians. Lord Burnham's view that the appointment of these official Ministers should be made compulsory by statute has much to commend it, for there would be a risk that a Governor might be tempted to dispense with such Ministers if their appointment was purely optional and was bitterly opposed by the intelligentsia. It is absolutely essential that the Governor's Cabinet should contain one or two Ministers whose tenure is not at the mercy of an irresponsible Press.

The Commissioners argue at length the propriety of transferring law and order (with the departments which that term covers) to the responsibility of the councils. They do not minimise the risks attaching to the course which they commend. They hope that the conferral of this power will so increase the sense of responsibility among Ministers and legislators that the evils which many predict from such a step will not occur. In this they are sanguine. There is real danger that the cause of justice may be tampered with for political, communal, and, I am afraid, sometimes mercenary reasons. It is well known that the onset of these tendencies is in its nature insidious, and may go a long way before it is clearly manifested. Disintegration in the loyalty and honesty of a police force or a magistracy may proceed very stealthily before the breaking point is reached. The individual occurrences which induce to it may not be susceptible of proof, and may singly not be very important, but their cumulative effect may be great, and even devastating. The check of an enlightened public opinion, so powerful in our own country to resist any such tendencies, is wholly lacking in India. The progress in restraining corruption has come, not from the pressure of public opinion in India, but from the application to Indian conditions of the standards which the Government and its higher services have brought with them from England. This is one of the reasons which must have influenced the Commission in the insistence that they place upon the preservation of a British element in the services. But, even with all the safeguards for the services which are recommended, there is no certainty that British recruits will be forthcoming, while, on the other hand, under the proposed Constitution, the influence that the services can bring to bear on the conduct of public affairs must obviously be much weaker in comparison with the past. The public servant had the assurance of support from the Government if he did his duty manfully. That assurance is even now much reduced, and in the future there may be no such assurance at all. A right of retiring on proportionate pension is not complete compensation for the loss of a secure career, and it at best offers only a very negative attraction to induce high-class recruits to enter the services. Nevertheless, the Commission deserves the gratitude of the services both for the generous tribute that it pays to their labours in the cause of India and for the recommendations that it makes in the hope of preserving them. This recommendation is in marked contrast to the defeatist proposal of at least one provincial Government that the security services must be provincialised for the gratification of provincial Ministers.

The Commissioners attach supreme importance to the extraordinary powers proposed for the provincial Governors and the

Governor-General. The necessity for such powers is often admitted, even by politicians, in the abstract, but their use in the concrete is a very different matter. The strain upon the Governor and the Governor-General to decide when the time has come to use these powers is bound to be very great. Even in the last few years there have been instances when they should have, but have not, been used. No instruments of instructions can be drawn up which do not somewhere conflict with one another, and wherever the observance of one instruction seems to involve the neglect of another the Governor, being a human being, will be tempted to follow the line of least resistance. A decision one way may raise a storm of clamour; a decision the other may sacrifice an interest which is unable to make its protest heard. It is obvious, therefore, that the selection of men for Governorships will be more difficult in the future than it has been in the past. Will the right men be forthcoming, and will they be selected?

The Commission's scheme for a 'Federal Assembly' to replace the present Legislative Assembly gives effect to a very important principle—namely, that the members of the new Assembly should be delegates to represent the provinces, and not the representatives of constituencies too large and too ignorant to establish any real connexion between the member and his constituency. Thus Bengal and Madras may have an inherent right to governing Bengalis and Madrasis, but such right cannot possibly extend to other parts of India. Only British rule made it possible to combine these countries and races under one Government, and only British rule can keep them combined. The fact that British authority has been exercised over several different peoples does not give these peoples any inherent right whatsoever to exercise authority over each other. All the right that they do possess is to see that in matters which pertain to the Central Power the interests of their own particular race are not subordinated to the interests of others. This necessity is met by the system of delegation which the Commission proposes.

The Simon Commission's scheme of progress represents a series of hopes based upon a true statement of facts, many of which tend to make the realisation of these hopes *prima facie* very remote. It is a bold and brave attempt to keep India united and secure without repudiating the rash announcement made by Mr. Montagu. That announcement was made without any preliminary survey of the conditions. If the Simon Commission had made their survey in 1917, and Mr. Montagu had deferred any announcement until the results of such a survey were in his hands, then the history of Indian reforms would have been written differently.

And what comes after ?

Each day the situation becomes more fraught with peril. For the last three years the policy followed in India has been to placate, if it were possible, a Hindu Congress which is set upon bringing British rule to an end, and each attempt to conciliate and placate has merely served to increase both the demands themselves and the insolent vehemence with which they are pressed. The great error has been to mistake a conspiracy led by Brahmins for a true national demand, and this mistake is being repeated every day. How is it possible to secure by conciliation the surrender of enemies who are flushed with success, and who believe that victory is within their grasp ? The Constitution proposed by the Commission, or any other form of Constitution which can be devised to meet the facts, can only be workable if legislative bodies include a substantial majority—to use Mr. Baldwin's favourite expression—of 'men of goodwill.' If this had been secured in the past, then even dyarchy would have proved a success. But if, under the new Constitution, the 'men of goodwill' cannot find seats upon the Legislature, neither this nor any other Constitution can succeed. The 'Round Table Conference' has now taken the place of the Simon Report in Indian political eyes. Sir John Simon's letter to the Prime Minister was intended to provide for a consultation between representatives of Great Britain, British India, and the Indian princes as to the best method by which the Indian States could be fitted into a Constitution for Greater India, and it was suggested because the Commission's original terms of reference had not directly extended to the problem of the Indian princes. This plain objective, contemplated by Sir John Simon, has become so broadened that it has developed into a conference at which Indian politicians of all shades expect to make their demands, and expect the British Parliament to accept and give effect to them. If the Congress condescends to attend the Round Table Conference at all, the demand it must make will be for immediate full self-government similar to that existing in Canada or Australia, with a short period of grace by the end of which the British troops will be withdrawn. This is indeed the demand, if slightly disguised, which is put forward by the so-called Liberals, whose only claim to the title of 'moderate' is that, while they give lip disapproval of the civil disobedience campaign, they protest vigorously against any steps taken by the Government to defeat it.

The Government of India would appear to be bracing itself to treat the Simon Report as an interesting exhibit in the case, which shows the inability even of the men who composed the Commission to understand the situation. Yet it is these men alone who have had the unique opportunity of an intensive

examination of the problem without the influence of long years of Indian administration. Such action, if persisted in by the Government of India, is bound to lead to a crisis. Under the atmosphere which has been produced by the continuous policy of surrender before the ambitions of a tiny minority, supported by a venomous Press, defeatism is spreading among millions of Indians otherwise prepared to be loyal, among European business men, who are so shortsighted as to prefer temporary relief from boycott pressure, even at the cost of surrender, and at the risk of future extinction, and, finally, among many stout-hearted Government servants who fear that the slide down the slope has gone so far, and has become so rapid, that no Government which they can find in sight will be strong enough to stay it.

The goodwill necessary for the working of the Simon scheme, or any other scheme with the same objective, can only be secured if the men of evil will are defeated and discredited. It is impossible to rally loyal friends unless they can feel absolutely sure that they will not be abandoned to the tender mercy of the extremists.

The world is watching with intense interest the course of the crisis, and the whole of the British Empire is deeply concerned in the decision that will have to be made. There is imminent danger lest the British Government should be tempted to buy by surrender a temporary relief which can only put off the ultimate crisis by a very short period. The interests at stake are not the grandeur of the British Empire alone, but the peace and happiness of many millions of men.

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